

External Consultant's Report- Assessment of the Contemporary Dance
Department of Concordia University
Submitted by Philip Szporer

Introduction

People in the field often talk about “dancing their dance”. It’s an informative statement, an insight into the idea of venturing into uncharted territory, the importance of working alone to develop ideas about the body, learn about collaboration, skill-building and to investigate the problem-solving necessary to move to the next stage. This concept speaks directly and eloquently to the body and the mind. In a university setting, it is all about allowing students to see things differently, and process ways of working, questioning practice, dealing with insecurities and awareness, moving beyond old ideas and forward to a new place.

The mission statement of the program is clear: to emphasize the discovery and development of the creative and technical capacity of the individual student towards choreography and performance. Students in the Major in Contemporary Dance attend classes in choreography, creative process, technique, history, music theory, have independent study options, and unsupervised laboratory times are available for them to work on their own. Further what is offered to them is an open-minded and welcoming atmosphere - very much the feeling one experiences at an artist colony.

Impressions of the program, within the university and in relation to the wider community, reveal many things; but I noticed that the department and the university seem to be caught up in a series of paradoxes - affairs and situations where contradictory forces seem to be co-existing despite their contradictions. Mainly the paradoxes, some unique to Concordia’s constituency, are financial in nature, some are directly related to infrastructure, and some are tied to issues of technology. These trends, as I will point out, demand a new response from the administration.

On another level, while there is an increase in the arts in Canada, there does not seem to be an increase in the number of people “using” art as a source of meaning in their life as opposed to a social ritual. People may be attending more artistic events, but it is not certain whether art has consequently become more important for them as a source of value. These currents can be put under the rubric of ‘culture building’, but I believe that the university has to position itself in this discussion.

Program Emphasis

Asked to assess the quality of the department - faculty, design, infrastructure - in a concise and direct manner, I would have to say the Contemporary Dance Program is meeting a need in the dance community locally, but also it reaffirms through its pedagogy that it is a rising force on a national and international level. This is in part due to the quality of the teaching, but beyond that important measure, the philosophy of the department instills in its students a sense of connectivity and a real power to think rigorously and make choices. In that way, the program fosters the development of a different breed of young person who will move into the world. I believe the department should continue to channel that course of development.

Setting Concordia's dance department apart from dance programs at other universities, is the emphasis placed on creation. In focusing on choreography and the creative process, and not strictly performance, the department is providing a valuable service to the country's arts community. Creativity can, I suppose, happen by osmosis, but to learn the craft of choreography is a rarer thing. In its curriculum, the program provides students with supportive information and methods to research and develop in the realm of contemporary dance. Budding choreographers, like visual artists or musicians, need the resources (studios, time, space) in which to learn their craft and, consequently, for this time spent working in the studio to be valued. In fact, many students graduating from the Contemporary Dance Program, come away saying, "The choreographic process has shown me a different way to dance."

To make life more livable for a new generation of dancemakers, to make contemporary dance a feasible profession for them to enter into, is not an unwarranted goal. Put into the larger context, far too often dancers and choreographers have been beleaguered, working in unspeakably filthy, unsanitary conditions, and are at a very basic level challenged in their ability to develop their art.

Quality of the department

The Concordia Contemporary Dance Program gives a sense of strength to the notion of dance as a profession in Montreal. It is important to stress that twenty years have gone by since its inception. The department has, therefore, been in evolution for a generation. The timing for the founding of the section and its subsequent growth into a department took place when contemporary dance was gaining recognition internationally and body energy was the rage. That Alf Pinsky, then Dean of the

Faculty of Fine Arts, and Elizabeth Langley, founder of the Program, understood the importance to underline the situation was visionary to say the least. While dance became a priority in other parts of the world, at least in Montreal, at Concordia University, there was recognition that dance needed to be supported. And it still does.

For the record, it is important to state that Quebec dance is on a par with anything from anywhere on the planet, and that Montreal is considered one of the contemporary dance capitals of the world. This is determined not merely by hype, but by the fact that some of our dance creators' professional edge is producing attention-getting formula-smashing work. The dance season here is crammed with programming year-round, and a community of dancemakers (from locals and imported talent) adds texture and insight and invention to the creativity that is referred to as *nouvelle danse*. That the Contemporary Dance Department has among its graduates and its faculty many fine creators, active in the field, with a profile here and abroad, is a testament to the artistic expression and experiential opportunity that exists in this city.

I understand that this assessment will help administrators at Concordia in the planning they will devise for the Contemporary Dance department and, as such, it will aid in determining the tone and the tenor of a next generation of dance professionals. Having informally tracked its development over these past twenty-odd years, I can affirm that the program has not only cultivated talent, but has allowed an unbridled brand of creativity to branch out into the larger community, worldwide.

I certainly am aware of the pride the University bestows on the reputations of its Communications and Cinemas Departments, to name just two. Both these departments are regularly cited as standard bearers for the University. I would suggest that the Contemporary Dance Program, while small in numbers, is another of Concordia's visible departments, equal to the values and achievements of other key departments in this university community.

Dance is a valid area of study in the academic system, where students can spend three years in a protected environment learning their craft. What is in evidence in Contemporary Dance program is a group of young people (by and large) who are working through the fragile ground known as creativity and expression.

Dance studios are extremely vulnerable places - the students bare their souls

(sometimes encouraged, sometimes cajoled), their tool is their body, and the one of the biggest challenges is to attend to their needs in a responsive way. "Nurturing each individual is not always easy to do," said one part-time faculty member. But there is a free-flow of information in the department where, as I've suggested, they can grow and gain a sense of perspective and depth.

It might be argued that anyone could learn the craft on the outside, in 'real life'. But it is also a reality that we live in a time and in a place (in Western society in the 21st century) where degrees are valued and demanded. At the university, in the Contemporary Dance degree program, students have access to studios, equipment, library services, at no cost, and that is a tremendous step-up. The university setting also fosters the collegiality that can spawn long-lasting careers and associations.

i) Outline of the visit

- a) At the department, I met with the two full-time faculty - Michael Montanaro, Acting Chair, and Silvy Panet-Raymond, Associate Professor. In addition I had interviews with several part-time faculty members - Jacques Brus, Florence Figols, Sandra Lapierre, Laurence Lemieux, Marie-Stéphane Ledoux and Isabelle van Grimde - and the Assistant to the Chair, Hillary Scuffell. In addition I met with a group of students representing the three levels in the program. As well, I met with Christopher Jackson, Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Andrea Fairchild, Associate Dean - Academic & Student Affairs, Faculty of Fine Arts, Elizabeth Sacca, Chair & Convener, University Academic Appraisals, Jack Lightstone, Provost and Vice-Rector, Research, as well as two members of the University Appraisal Committee for Dance, including the Chair, Miranda D'Amico.

b) At the Department of Contemporary Dance, my visit took place on the third floor of the TJ (Loyola) Building, including visits to 2 large studios, 2 smaller studios in the Theatre Department (on the ground floor), as well as the two offices occupied by full-time staff, a media room (video, audio, software applications), a reception area, a student locker and lounge area. I understand there is also a part-time faculty/storage room. At the Sir George Campus, which I did not visit, the Department has access to 2 class-room size studios, for labs and rehearsal use.

c) I had the opportunity to sit in (briefly, due to the hectic schedule) on four classes - Choreography II, Body Movement I and Body Movement III, and Workshop in Dance II. As well, beyond the demands of the timetable set out for me, I attended two different performances of the year-end showing of student works, held the weekend

of April 20-22, at Moyse Hall.

ii) Faculty

The dance department is left to its own devices. But the overall perception is that under the current Chair, the department is visible and “interesting pr” has come about from his presence. With his background as a performer, company director, multimedia artist and teacher, he also has a deep connection with interdisciplinary and technological research in stage production.

Both Michael Montanaro and Silvy Panet-Raymond, the two full-time faculty members, have strong qualities that complement the other. They are very different in temperament and discipline. Both are seen as “deeply competent”, by the part-timers and the students alike. Still, many voices in the department expressed the wish that another full-time faculty member could be appointed to pick up the slack, share in the stress, paperwork, general bureaucratic and time management considerations and managerial strategies that are part of running the department.

The full-timers need to keep maintaining their professional development and research, but it’s seen as “a bit of a battle...,” said one. “If I want to apply for a research grant, and they ask for a video of past work, I haven’t anything to show. I feel I am falling between the cracks.”

Both parties expressed concern about the pressure to do research, and the unsatisfactory nature of having to do short and intensive spurts of work, particularly in view of having to concurrently ensure continuity and academic stability for the department. Meeting the students needs also means an increased workload as advisors and project supervisors, i.e., for independent study courses (which apparently are very popular). (see Self-Appraisal, pgs 62-63, “Issues Related to the Program”). According to the Self-Appraisal Report, the department received no funded research support in 1998-1999.

As a gauge of the commitment of the part-time faculty and the resources made available to students, I bring up the first-year creative process course, team-taught by Jacques Brochu and Marie-Stéphane Ledoux. While it is unusual to team-teach, what this duo brings to the class - as do most of the part-timers in the department - is their own research, a sharing of their tools. The students get attention and insight from two experienced points of view, and they receive important keys to unlock doors within themselves. The benefits, in the form of appropriate feedback, for these entry-

level students is manifold.

It was suggested by several part-time faculty that meetings be held at least once a month to better develop communication between them. These meetings would allow teachers to "tune up" courses and create bridges among the faculty.

Many students mentioned that both Montanaro and Panet-Raymond spend long hours in the department, available to the students and part-timers, providing support and "poking and prodding" people in new ways of experimentation and exploration. Students, for instance, through Montanaro's tutelage, are involved in digital editing and PowerPoint photoshop.

In other university programs (notably the UQAM dance degree) dancers can easily become the tools of a choreographer. At Concordia that is not the case. Students (some of whom have jazz dance in their background, others with a modern background) are building vocabularies and accessing tools. In this program, the teachers impart to students encouragement, integrity, and responsibility, to be judicious in their choices and fair in their outlook. While students travel from theory to practice, there is no pressure to produce assembly-line work; the students learn to take up their own space. What the Department is providing for people is a work ethic and a learning process leading to awareness.

iii) Admission standards/Student Demand

The Contemporary Dance program is attracting more out-of-province students, as well an increase in foreign students (see Self Appraisal, pg. 27 on Recruitment Procedures, also pg 65 for details, and pg 68 for recommendations) The department has a website (since September 1998), which offers Quicktime movies of student works, as well as placing advertisements announcing auditions for the program placed in the Montreal weekly alternative papers, Voir and HOUR, and leaflets available at the year-end student presentations, at Moyse Hall or Studio 303. Visibility and outreach are drawing students from other areas of fine arts into the program. A summer dance workshops series, geared to non-dance majors, is another draw. (see pg 65)

v. Quality of graduate student research

At present there are no faculty resources to cover an MA program. (See Self-Appraisal, pg. 66)

vi. Student completion rates and student retention

In addition, orientation, advising, mentoring sessions and activities are active (see Self Appraisal, pg 27), and there is a viable Dance Student Association which works in liaison with the faculty. As well, students are apprised of university programs in other parts of the world, posted in full view on a community billboard, as is news about scholarships, financial aid, workshops, etc...

Since 1999, the drop-out rate has decreased by more than 50%, and more students are graduating from the program in recent years (6 in 1996-1997, 5 in 1997-1998 versus 15 in 1998-1999 and 14 in 1999-2000), see Self Appraisal, pg. 26). As the statistics show, the students (representing full-time, part-time, mature students, and extended credit students) are sticking with the program through to the end, whereas in the past this was not the case (it appears that the department once would lose a third of the students by the third year). The program, therefore, is meeting student needs, without an increase in funding. (Self Appraisal, pg 18, Conclusions). It appears that there is an increase in inter-disciplinary students enrolled in the program. That seems to be a positive injection into the ranks of the student body. Twenty-odd majors are registered in the program per year (between 21-24 students registered between 1995-1999, Self-Appraisal, p. 19). Women still represent the vast majority of the students, although the statistics indicate that there is a slight increase in the enrollment of male students. The English to French language breakdown appears to be 3:1 (Self Appraisal, p. 20), and the age breakdown favors younger students (Self Appraisal, p. 20), but that is normal for a physical discipline such as dance, and reflects professional realities as well.

vii-viii Resources

Space is an issue. A new studio, with sprung floors, seems necessary in the TJ Annex, so that all technique classes can be held in the morning. (see Self-Appraisal, pg. 66). Also, the maintenance of the studios is a major issue in the evaluations and in discussions with students and faculty.

The studios used at the Sir George Campus, in the Victoria School gymnasium, are characterized by students as having “bad security, bad working conditions”, and are “unsanitary”. Still it appears important that the dance students have access to a downtown facility - to be closer to other fine arts students, and to be able work with them in lab sessions; as well, most live in the Plateau-Mile End area, so to have proximity to many of their homes, especially when they have to work late at night, is an important consideration. But these studios cannot be used for regular classes, as it

would create large gaps in scheduling (see Self-Appraisal, pg. 66)

Air conditioning in the secretarial area also seems a necessity as temperatures can rise to 43 degrees Celsius during the summer months. Windows open in so there is, effectively, no ventilation. Hillary Scuffell is a key member of the department team and to enable her to continue to work in comfort is not an unattainable ideal, nor is it a major investment.

The department is hoping there will be an equipped performance space on campus, “a place to experiment in, to have the ability to go to the next step...”, whereas current stages on campus seem inadequate to the needs of the department.

While I did not visit the Vanier Library, I have used the services myself on a number of occasions, and I can heartily support the suggested improvements listed for periodicals and non-print documents (Self-Appraisal, pg. 58). These tools help students, professionals and the public alike to compare the past and present, to learn from the past as they go forward to the future. Concerted efforts are needed to ensure this support and inspiration for new generations of choreographers, dancers, and those involved in dance/media.

ix. Technology

Many administrators during my visit made mention of a digital arts centre to be set up in affiliation with the Université du Québec à Montréal in the coming years. While the Faculty of Fine Arts is seen as an integral part of the evolving activities of such a centre, it is important to consider what kind of access the Contemporary Dance Department would have in scheme of things.

It is well known that in a number of Western countries the dance field is trying to effectively conduct dance documentation in many formats including but not limited to film, video and new digital technologies. The idea of dance documentation does not only mean the recording of dance but also how to enhance creative practice and intellectual investigation of dance.

It might be useful for the University to consider establishing a Leadership Group, a think tank of sorts, to identify, develop and guide the direction of Concordia’s involvement in such a digital arts centre. Members might be invited to think broadly, inclusively and creatively about strengthening the conceptual thinking, cultural perspectives and technical practices, in particular to increase the capacity of the

dance field. Dance students might advance their level of work by exploring and discussing issues in peer seminars and courses while strengthening their technical skills in film, video and digital technologies. Curricula for the dance department could include seminars on the role documentation can play in the creation, appreciation, critical analysis and scholarly study of dance.

Dance is such a visceral experience that you often lose that in trying to deposit work on screen. And it is often a poor substitute for the live performance. But to have a place where people can invent and create, where the boundaries are pushed, will be an important contribution to the field of dance. This could encourage students seeking advanced degrees in film, video and dance to work cooperatively.

There is little money in the dance world per se. With facilities, cameras and editing systems so expensive in the real world, the chance to have the time, as a student, to do work in this area, at a digital arts centre, could put Concordia's Dance Department on a par with other international centres of excellence.

It should be noted that the Dance Department at UQAM has just launched a "technochoreographic" lab, utilizing the LIFEanimation system, supported by \$205,830 in funding. Without going into the specifics of the program, this centre will enable choreographers to bank and document their danceworks.

See Self-Appraisal (pg. 46-47, for listing of multi-media and audio-visual equipment inventory.

x. Teaching and Curriculum

Speaking to people both within the department and externally it is recognized that while there has always been a strong creative edge to the department, the level of technique among the students has increased in the last couple of years or so. In large measure this is due to the hiring that is in place, as well as the register of the students accepted into the program.

Dedication keeps coming to mind when I think of the experience of being with the Department for these two select days. What stands out is a dedication on the part of the teachers, but also a dedication as evidenced on the part of the students. Teachers are giving students tools to learn, referencing concepts and philosophies, stressing mastery but also an open-mindedness to the art form. The environment is educational, but it's felt that life lessons are learned.

In Concordia's dance department, students are treated as "intelligent adults," says one of the faculty. Students delve into their own ideas, not doing imposed work, as occurs at UQAM's dance department, which stresses performance as well as a theoretical approach in a more "institutional" setting. These departments are in the words of several of the part-timers, "two different worlds". (The same might be said for the LADDMI school, here in Montreal, which offers DECs and stresses interpretation over creation.) At UQAM, "the body signature (of the students) is the same," said one part-time instructor, who has worked at both institutions. "Here everyone creates their own signature... a kind of bastard creator." Another said that the UQAM environment is "more homogeneous and more conventional", and in the UQAM student you see "the teacher behind the student. Here, students' work is more fragile."

In this calmer, cozier atmosphere, Concordia's dance students are encouraged to be open to anything and be gutsy. There are a range of personalities in a department which encourages the individuality of the student, and helps to support students to create with their own artistic voice. The department affords them a wider philosophy about their bodies and themselves, and therefore a definition of dance which is challenging and evolving.

It could be argued that a nascent interest in history is emerging out of a previously aggressively ahistorical culture and society. Improvements to the history class (offered every second year), to tailor it to a connected approach and a conceptual instruction of the material, would allow students to think differently about the world. Students strongly suggested that this three-hour class, currently given in a dance studio at the end of the day, be taught in a proper classroom.

The students were also asking for classes or workshops in writing and critiquing, to gain abilities to read and analyze. Some of the part-time instructors indicated that a greater emphasis on historical content and ideas would be beneficial for the students. Another recommendation was the the history class, currently scheduled as a 3-credit course in first year, should be a two-semester allotment, as some students lack "general references in the arts", said one part-timer.

Monies have been earmarked for special workshops and lectures (photography, dance for the camera, writing skills). The department would benefit from an infusion of money for guest lecturers and pilot projects (proposed alternative training, such as

Pilates, postural alignment, movement efficiency). It would be a positive step to get creative innovators on-site into the university community, as well as exchange resources with other institutions and individuals, and develop the complimentarily between institutions. (see Self-Appraisal, pg 38, 5.ii, on Teaching, Research & Creative Activities of Faculty, for more on Academic and pedagogical activities sponsored by the Department).

xii. Appropriate Partnerships

Many in the department suggest that the inter-related arts component be pushed and integrated, as some of the faculty are connected with new trends and consider themselves to be multi-media artists. This year, collaboration with the Music department involved the students connecting with composers for their choreographic work. Other collaborations exist between the Theatre Department and Dance. The opportunity, this year, to work with lighting people from the National Theatre School was another boon to the students' development.

The year-end student presentation of work at Moyse Hall was a real insight into the strengths of the department. From a critic's standpoint, several of the pieces could easily have been presented in a professional context. For those who ask why not perform at the Oscar Peterson Hall - there is no lighting grid, no wings, in other words, it is not suited to dance. The DB Clarke Theatre at the Sir George campus apparently costs more than Moyse Hall. In addition, Montanaro's connection with the lighting designer Spike Lyne, at Moyse Hall, provided students with professional lighting plot for their shows. On both evenings that I attended, the hall was filled. The question arises: Is the show looked at by the public in an objective way because it is off-campus? Or would it be better suited to remain a visible Concordia-produced and -delivered event?

See Self-Appraisal (pg 38-39), for details of other collaborations and exchange.

xiii. Recommendations

Most of what is listed in the department's Self-Appraisal (pg. 58-60) is feasible and realistic, with the possible exception of the increase in the number of larger size studios, and perhaps, a third full-time faculty member. In the list of possibles and do-ables, in no order of importance: i) an increase in technique classes, for instance, would provide students with a better footing; ii) there is no percussionist on the fifth day of the technique class. A reinjection of funds to provide live musical accompaniment throughout needs to be addressed; iii) clean studios; iv) increase

documentation in the library; v) status within the proposed digital arts centre; vi) a Leadership Group re Concordia University's involvement in the digital arts centre; vii) improvement to the dance history class; viii) guaranteed funding for workshops (with professionals) and pilot projects.

The department clearly has a philosophy which indicates the practical experience-based work and research is valued above theory-based intellectual endeavor. That should be respected and enhanced, but analysis of issues and ideas should be encouraged, as the suggested improvement list in the Self-Appraisal itself indicates.

Conclusions

In setting about the assignment of evaluation, I was constantly aware of gauging the distinction between "as it is" and "as it could/should be". As I stated at the outset, I believe the Contemporary Dance Program has a distinctive place in the history and identity of the university. The visit to the department was heartening. As an urban university, the department is responding to student needs and welcoming students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The creative activity within the department is also in synch with currents in the contemporary dance world.

But I sense a tension that exists within the Fine Arts Faculty (not the Contemporary Dance Department) that probably stems from funding concerns. If the University itself cannot further fund the Department through its own resources, I would heartily recommend that the Faculty of Fine Arts spend some serious time developing projects (residencies, fellowships), which could be funded through foundation grants. As a suggestion, there is an advancement office at Concordia, and Tamas Zsolnay (in charge of this dossier) could channel his expertise into creating special projects for the Contemporary Dance Department.

It seems to me that the Contemporary Dance Program espouses four values (at least) - independence, boldness, risk-taking, and relevance - and these qualities need to be authentically supported and embraced by the Dean of Fine Arts and his associates, as well as the Rector's Office. Authenticity is incompatible with too tightly structured a vision. The necessity of increased flexibility within and between departments must be encouraged. If the aforementioned values are implemented as guides at a Faculty level, the department will continue to function as it must.

The future for a department such as Contemporary Dance is poised to enter a potentially exciting time, but questions inherent to its value within the university,

need to be addressed with renewed vigor. Concordia University's Contemporary Dance Department, with its bank of creative personnel, is uniquely positioned to reflect and lead the process of questioning into our new era.

Montreal, April 30, 2001